

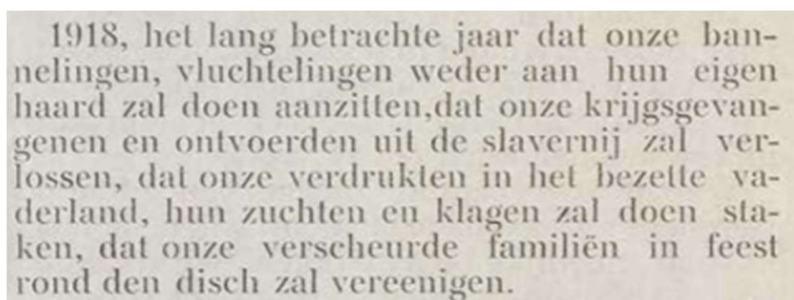
The language of the new year and utopian resolutions

In January 1918, Belgium was a broken nation and a fragmented one too. Most Belgians lived in occupied Belgium but many other fragments abounded, not least the Belgian communities in exile. France, the Netherlands and Great Britain had provided shelter for Belgian refugees ever since the outbreak of hostilities, 4 August 1914. With the First World War entering its fifth calendar year, was there any language of resolution left for those who were not able to return and for those who endured the hardship of occupation?

Sampling from <https://hetarchief.be/> the number of occurrences of Nieuwjaar remained pretty much the same throughout the war years. True, the peak of wishing well and hope for an early end to the conflict drove most instances to occur by the end of 1914, but for the following four years this figure stayed within a 232-269 band. Typically, over one third of new year related stories were published in January.

Like the nation it served, the Belgian press was fragmented and scattered. Under German occupation not much newsworthy was printed in Belgium itself. Most newspapers appeared in exile though. Arguably the most popular Belgian newspaper in exile, read across the various exile communities in the Netherlands, France and Great Britain, as well as by the Belgian soldiers at the front, was *Vrij België*. It printed a poem by Johannes De Maegt about a carillon and how its elderly master was killed and how a younger one stood firm in the face of adversity and how the continued music made everyone happy. The main exile newspaper in Britain, *De Stem Uit België* joined in and printed a telegram from King Albert to Field Marshal Haig, reassuring the latter that Belgian troops were still standing strong in the new year. *Het Vaderland*, which appeared in Le Havre, added a telegram by Lloyd George, who acknowledged the support of Belgium and who confirmed once again the determination of the British to stand with the Belgians. It was, however, interesting to see that no reference was made any longer to the many thousands of Belgians on British soil.

The main newspaper printed in unoccupied Belgium was *De Belgische Standaard*. The new year issue (1 and 2 January 1918) was very hopeful in its intentions and resolutions for the new year: the end of the conflict was nigh and all those in exile were to return very soon! Although the first page listed the names of the editors typically contributing, the near utopian 'Zalig Nieuwjaar' of that issues remained anonymous. The local journal *Herenthals* seconded the sentiment, extending the hope of the return beyond soldiers and refugees to the prisoners of war.



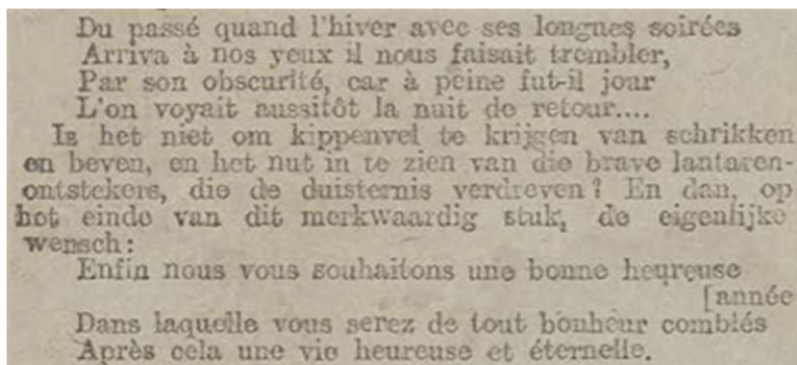
1918, het lang betachte jaar dat onze bannelingen, vluchtelingen weder aan hun eigen haard zal doen aanzitten, dat onze krijgsgevangenen en ontvoerden uit de slavernij zal verlossen, dat onze verdrukten in het bezette vaderland, hun zuchten en klagen zal doen staken, dat onze verscheurde familiën in feest rond den disch zal vereenigen.

Herenthals, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Of all the Belgian newspapers perhaps *Het Vlaamsche nieuws* struck the new year note wrong the most. The newspaper, appearing in occupied Flanders and with the support of the German authorities, seemed blissfully unaware of all the trauma the conflict had caused and was still causing. Moreover, not only was the Flemish flag ready to comfort those who needed support, the old Germanic tradition of 'Heil! Heil! Heil!' surely was to remind readers of the celebratory mood of the time of the year.

Flamingantisme

The *Gazet van Brussel* was published in Dutch only and had the Flemish poet René De Clercq^[i] as its editor-in-chief. Its issue of Tuesday 1 and Wednesday 2 January hit the new year with substantial contemplations on Flemish nationalism, called *flamingantisme*, which was haunted by the German and their occupation, as many Flemish nationalists actively sought support from the Germans in obtaining further Flemish independence (*activists*). Only a few days earlier, on 22 December 1917, had the Raad van Vlaanderen (Council of Flanders, a gathering of Flemish activists) proclaimed the independence of Flanders.^[ii] René was one of the main administrators behind the Raad, so his leading piece in his own newspaper attracted quite some readership. De Clercq called for action, for deeds, not words, so that the Flemish nationalism that he adhered to would be understood by both the people of Belgium and many other nations. In his essay De Clercq refers to Greece and Italy and how nations had been forged in the past. De Clercq continued and dwelled into the past and the poetry produced by the lantern people of Ixelles, Brussels, using a poem produced well before the war to ponder about how the trauma of the day had dried up all poetry. Peculiarly, the poem De Clercq used to relate to the new year was written in French.



Gazet van Brussel, 1 January 1918, p.2 (via hetarchief.be)

Regained Flemish identity garnered pace even in exile. *Het soete Waesland* printed a notification of how the 'Vlaamsch Verbond' of Birtley-Elisabethville had organised an end of year party and how the journal had received nearly two pounds from the proceeds thanks to the efforts of several people from St Niklaas, which is the main city of the Waasland region.

Local wishes

During the war many journals and periodicals appeared, including soldiers' pamphlets, aiming for the readership of a particular village, town or small region, wherever they were (in occupied Belgium, at the front or in exile). *Bree aan den Yzer* wished all the best to its readership, which would consist of people from the Bree area, Limburg, only. Among the tidings the two-page stencil brought were notifications of people from Bree passing away in exile in Paris and Weert, the Netherlands. In the *Hobooksche frontblaadje*, by and for soldiers from Hoboken, south of Antwerp, the local tidings are concluded by a happy new year to all those people from Hoboken who had married recently. In *De Diestenaar*, for people of a town in Brabant, the message is clear: this really ought to be the very last time soldiers at the front should be wished a happy new year. This resonated in *De payot der taalgrens*:

<p><i>Eerst en vooral een woord van dank om de goede wenschen die ge my zoo talryk stuurdet ter gelegenheid van het vernieuwen des jaars! Aan U allen ook een goed, zalig en gelukkig nieuwjaar!</i></p> <p><i>'t Is de wensch die in de gezezegenden vredestryd aller lippen ontvlood by het doodgaan van het oude jaar. De vader en de moeder wenschten het hun kinderen, de kinderen hun ouders, de echtgenooten en vrienden aan elkaar, de broer zyn zuster, de knecht z'n meester. Er was feest en vreugde gejubel en gejoel! Het was vrede!</i></p> <p><i>En nu verre van 't lieve dorpje, van ouder, familie en vrienden blyft er ons enkel van dit alles nog de zielige herinnering over! 't Is Oorlog!</i></p> <p><i>Droevig nieuwjaar!</i></p> <p><i>Gelukkig dat alles on zegt dat het de laatste maal zyn zal dat wy het verre van alles wat ons duurbaar is zullen moeten doorbrengen.</i></p> <p><i>Daarom jongens, geen en moed verloren, ginds wacht men moedig en ongeduldig op ons allen; in stilte wordt er geleden en gebeden; ginds ook is men overtuigd dat het jaar 1918 het laatste zal wezen van dezen gruwelyken oorlog.</i></p> <p><i>Nogmaals, aan U allen een goed en zalig nieuwjaar! Harten hoog!</i></p>	<p><i>First of all, a word of thanks for the many good wishes that you sent me on the occasion of the renewing of the year! To all of you a good, blissful and happy New Year as well!</i></p> <p><i>It is the wish that in the blessed time of peace upon the death of the old year was set free from all lips. Fathers and mothers wished it for their children, the children for their parents, the spouses and friends, the brother his sister, the servant his master. There was celebration and joy and cheer! There was peace!</i></p> <p><i>And now far from this lovely village, from parents, family and friends, all that we have left of this is a sad memory! There is War!</i></p> <p><i>Sad New Year!</i></p> <p><i>Fortunately, all signs are telling us that this will be the last time we will have to spend the new year far from anything that is dear to us.</i></p> <p><i>That is why, boys, no courage should be lost, at home all are awaiting us courageously and impatiently, in silence there is suffering and there are prayers; but above all there is the firm conviction that the year 1918 will be the last one of this horrible war.</i></p> <p><i>Again, to You all a happy and blissful New Year! Hearts high!</i></p>
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However, of all local papers and soldiers' stencils, the *De Poperingsche keikop* perhaps nicely caught the mood of realism of the time: how sad it was the even by uttering 'a happy new year' one would both dream of returning to one's own home but also fully realise that any happy tiding is a vain one, if not a sad mockery. This was echoed in the *Onze Temschenaars* for soldiers and civilians of Temse, southeast of Antwerp, alike: despite all the warm wishes, many a thought would go to a black cross somewhere along the river Yser where a beloved member of the family died a hero's death and now lay slain and buried.

Sources

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De Belgische Standaard, 1 January 1918, p.1.

De Diestenaar: maandblad der soldaten van het kanton Diest, 1 January 1918, p.1.

De payot der taalgrens, 1 January 1918, p.1.

De Poperingsche keikop: bladje der Poperingnaars in 't leger, 1 January 1918, p.1.

De stem uit België, 4 January 1918, p.4.

Gazet van Brussel: nieuwsblad voor het Vlaamsche volk, 1 January 1918, pp.1-2.

Herenthals: wordt verspreid en verzonden aan al de Herenthalsenaren die hun adres opgeven, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Het soete Waesland: kosteloos oorlogsblad voor de soldaten van het Land van Waes, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Het vaderland: Belgisch dagblad te Havre verschijnend, 3 January 1918, p.3.

Het Vlaamsche nieuws, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Hobooksch frontblaadje, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Onze Temschenaars, 1 January 1918, p.1.

Vrij België, 1 January 1918, p.6.

[i] René De Clercq (1877 – 1932) was a Flemish political activist, writer, poet, and composer. After studying at the University of Gent he became a contributor and editor for the magazine *Van Nu en Straks*. During World War I he fled to the Netherlands. There he taught at the Belgian school in Amsterdam, while editing and contributing (mostly poetry) to the expat magazine “De Vlaamsche Stem” (The Flemish Voice), which (with German funding) slowly became an organ for Flemish activism. After the magazine was discontinued in 1916, he wrote a now famous poem directed at the Belgian government in exile in Le Havre, “Aan die van Havere” (To the Havrians). In 1917 he wrote the song “Daar is maar één Vlaanderen” (There is only one Flanders) that became the national anthem of the Flemish separatists. On December 22, 1917, the Raad van Vlaanderen, to which De Clercq belonged, declared its independence from Belgium. Upon the instigation of the German occupying administration De Clercq became curator of a museum in Brussels. After the war De Clercq fled to the Netherlands again, where he received the news of the death sentence pronounced upon him by the Belgian government in 1920. De Clercq was able to return to Belgium after amnesty in 1929, but eventually died in the Netherlands.

(based on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_de_Clercq, but edited)

Note on *Van Nu en Straks*: *Van Nu en Straks* (Of Now and Later / Today and Tomorrow) was a Flemish literary and cultural magazine founded in 1893 by August Vermeylen. The magazine, with a cover by Henry van de Velde (who stayed in Britain during most of the war years and whose wife Lalla became intimately involved with W.B. Yeats on the one hand and the Omega Workshops on the other), served as a vehicle for a Flemish literary revival. The heterogeneous group of writers and artists associated with the journal was devoted to art for art's sake and did not hold further or strong dogmatic views on aesthetics or adherence to schools of art. (based on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Van_Nu_en_Straks, but edited).

Note on the Raad van Vlaanderen: The Raad van Vlaanderen (Council of Flanders) was a group of Flemish notorieties who aimed to establish a quasi-independent Flemish government during the German occupation of Belgium. The Raad was created on 4 February 1917 by members of the “activist” (or “maximalist”) faction of the Flemish Movement. Its founders, who included Pieter Tack and August Borms, wanted to realize the independence of Flanders from Belgium using German support provided as part of the Flamenpolitik. The Council originally included 46 members, but eventually expanded to include 93. Despite hopes that the Council would be allowed full legislative powers, it never became more than a consultative body. It also suffered from internal factionalism and infighting. On 22 December 1917, the council proclaimed the autonomy and independence of Flanders. The Armistice in November 1918 led to the end of the Council. In the aftermath of the war, many of the members of the RVV were arrested and imprisoned as collaborators. (based on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raad_van_Vlaanderen, but edited).

[ii] In Flemish nationalist literature references are made to the independence of Finland (6 December 1917) which virtually coincided with the Raad van Vlaanderen's proclamation. However, in November 1917 a change of leadership in German occupying administration had become less favourable to the Flemish activists and is more likely to have been the trigger.